

Adarsh Gram: A Gandhian Dream of Gram Swaraj

India lives in its villages, and development of villages will be critical if we want to close the gap between the “haves and have not’s” for a better human development. In the Human Development Report (HDR) 2014, India ranks at 135th place both for the overall Human Development Index (HDI) and the Gender Development Index (GDI), a rating classed by the United Nations as “medium human development.”⁽¹⁾

There is a substantial inequity in terms of health and development progress among the rural population. Among the states those are doing well, there remain pockets where not much has changed since independence. This inequity further worsens with every passing year, with health being one of the major determinants for worsening inequity. In India, paying for healthcare has become a major source of impoverishment for the poor and even the middle class.

Even the basic sanitation facilities are not available to all across India. According to the 2011 census, only 32.7% of rural households have access to toilets.⁽²⁾ India continues to have the largest number of people in the world defecating in the open. It has remained a challenge to evolve a strategy and process, addressing the various social determinants affecting the human development of the population, to make a paradigm shift.

On the occasion of 68th Independence Day, Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi announced “Sansad Adarsh Gram Yojana” — a holistic comprehensive sustainable approach to empower Indian villages and make it a model. He has urged the Member of Parliament (MP)’s to adopt one village of their choice that should include all interventions of health, education, infrastructure, sanitation, hygiene, livelihood, and social aspects of human development. Also on 2 October 2014, Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi launched the “Swachh Bharat Abhiyan”.⁽³⁾ Both these missions can practically be combined to work for betterment of the rural Indian population and realizing the Gandhian dream of an ideal village.

Gandhian Concept of Village Development

The word Swaraj is a sacred word, a Vedic word, meaning self-rule and self-restraint, and not freedom from all restraint which “independence” often means. Real Swaraj will come not by the acquisition of authority by a few but by the acquisition of the capacity by all

to resist authority when it is abused. In other words, Swaraj is to be obtained by empowering the masses to a sense of their capacity to regulate and control authority. Gandhian vision of ideal village or village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbors for its own wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is necessary.⁽⁴⁾

According to Gandhiji, ideal village is very simple

An ideal Indian village will be so constructed as to lend itself to perfect sanitation. It will have cottages with sufficient light and ventilation built of a material obtainable within a radius of five miles of it. The cottages will have courtyards enabling householders to plant vegetables for domestic use and to house their cattle. The village lanes and streets will be free of all avoidable dust. It will have wells according to its needs and accessible to all. It will have houses of worship for all, also a common meeting place, a village common for grazing its cattle, a co-operative dairy, primary and secondary schools in which industrial education will be the central fact, and it will have Panchayats for settling disputes. It will produce its own grains, vegetables and fruit, and its own Khadi. This is roughly my idea of a model village... I am convinced that the villagers can, under intelligent guidance, double the village income as distinguished from individual income. There are in our villages’ inexhaustible resources not for commercial purposes in every case but certainly for local purposes in almost every case. The greatest tragedy is the hopeless unwillingness of the villagers to better their lot.⁽⁵⁾

My ideal village will contain intelligent human beings. They will not live in dirt and darkness as animals. Men and women will be free and able to hold their own against anyone in the world.⁽⁴⁾

As Gandhiji himself said, “I know that the work (of shaping the ideal village) is as difficult as to make of India an ideal country... But if one can produce one ideal village, he will have provided a pattern not only for the whole country but perhaps for the whole world. More than this a seeker may not aspire after.”⁽⁴⁾

Role of the Gram Panchayat

Gandhiji made it very clear that concentration of either economic or political power would violate all the essential principles of participatory democracy and thereby of Swaraj. To promote decentralization, Gandhiji suggested the institution of village republics both as institutions of parallel politics and as units of economic autonomy. Village being the lowest unit of a decentralized system, politically a village has to be small enough to permit everyone to participate directly in the

decision-making process. It is the basic institution of participatory democracy.

Panchayat Raj is a system and process of good governance. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj has issued specific guidelines to make Gram Sabha as a vibrant forum for promoting planned economic and social development of the villages in a transparent way. It offers equal opportunity to all citizens including the poor, the women, and the marginalized to discuss and criticize, approve, or reject proposals of the Gram Panchayat and also assess its performance.

According to Mahatma Gandhi, utilization of the local resources is quite fundamental to the development of the Panchayat Raj system. The Panchayats with the Gram Sabhas should be so organized as to identify the resources locally available for development in the agricultural and industrial sectors. The Gram Panchayat elected annually by the adult villagers, male and female, possessing minimum prescribed qualifications, will conduct the Government of the village.

Gandhiji proposed the following rules for the guidance of village workers:⁽⁶⁾

1. A Panchayat should in the first instance be elected by a public meeting called for the purpose by beat of drums;
2. It should be recommended by the Tahsil Committee;
3. Such Panchayat should have no criminal jurisdiction;
4. It may try civil suits if the parties to them refer their disputes to the Panchayat;
5. No one should be compelled to refer any matter to the Panchayat;
6. No Panchayat should have any authority to impose fines, the only sanction behind its civil decrees being its moral authority, strict impartiality and the willing obedience of the parties concerned;
7. There should be no social or other boycott for the time being;
8. Every Panchayat will be expected to attend to the education of boys and girls in its village, sanitation, medical needs, maintenance and cleanliness of village wells or ponds, and up-liftment of and the daily wants of the vulnerable.

The Gandhian ideas of Gram Swaraj and Panchayat Raj system can become vehicles for ushering in the much-needed social and political change by including all the stakeholders in the process of decision-making and public policy formulation. As Gandhi said, "*Panchayat Raj represents true democracy realized. We would regard the humblest and the lowest Indian as being equally the ruler of India with the tallest in the land.*"⁽⁴⁾ Therefore, concerted, systematic, and sustained endeavors are needed on the part of those for whom Gram Swaraj remains a

cherished dream for the empowerment of people and for a participatory democracy.

Best Practices – Can be Replicated for Adarsh Gram

The "KHOJ – A Search for Innovations and Sustainability in Community Health and Development" projects undertaken by the VHAI in 14 pockets of the country indicate that it is possible to involve community for their own development and health promotion. The thrust areas of the Khoj program were Health, Community Development, Community organization, and Environment.

The main emphasis of projects on health was health interventions – providing curative services in KHOJ health center, health and relief camps. In KHOJ, women's health status was given due consideration with focus on adopting holistic approach to reproductive health. Specific health issues like malaria, diarrhea, and measles that were both a cause of mortality and morbidity was looked into. Besides curative health, health promotion was emphasized upon to develop need based area specific communication strategy.

With regard to Community development, the core principle of KHOJ was that health issues could not be segregated completely from community development. Thus, focus was on capacity building which involved vocational training, training for income generation activities and utilization of locally available resources. Focus was also on formation of Self Help Group's (SHG's) that were linked with banks and encouraged to initiate income generation activity. After KHOJ intervention, there was a drop in Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) and maternal deaths, percentage of women receiving ante natal care increased and so also the numbers of deliveries conducted by Traditional Birth Attendant (TBA), local Panchayats were strengthened and sustainable income generation programs implemented.⁽⁷⁾

Communitization of public health services under the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) and the role of Village Health Nutrition and Sanitation Committee (VHNSC) in village development

NRHM envisages the "Communitization" of public health services enabling both, public health employees as well as local communities to develop ownership in the Public Health Service Institution. The process of communitization is expected to help in universal access to equitable, affordable, and quality health care that is accountable and responsive to the needs of the people.

One of the approaches of NRHM for communitization is constitution of VHNSC. The committee is expected

to work collectively on issues related to health and social determinants at the village level. The VHNSC is particularly envisaged as being central to “community action” under NRHM, to support the process of Decentralized Health Planning. The committee, therefore, is envisioned to play leadership role for providing a platform for improving health awareness and access to health services, address specific local needs, and serve as a mechanism for community based planning and monitoring. The committee functions under the overall supervision of Gram Panchayat.

The committee is formed at each of the revenue village level and should have a minimum of 15 members with representatives from elected member of the Panchayat, Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM), Anganwadi workers, Teachers, Community health volunteers, and Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA).⁽⁸⁾

The objectives of VHNSC under NRHM are as:⁽⁸⁾

- To provide an institutional mechanism for the community to be informed of health programs and government initiatives and to participate in the planning and implementation of these programs, leading to better outcomes.
- To provide a platform for convergent action on social determinants and all public services directly or indirectly related to health.
- To provide an institutional mechanism for the community to voice health needs, experiences and issues with access to health services, so that the institutions of local government and public health service providers can take note and respond appropriately.
- To empower Panchayats with the understanding and mechanisms required for them to play their role in governance of health and other public services and to enable communities through their leadership to take collective action for the attainment of better health status in the village.
- To provide support and facilitation to the community health workers – ASHA and other frontline healthcare providers who have to interface with the community and provide services.

The VHNSC under NRHM need to be revitalized and their capacity building is must for fulfilling their proposed role. This platform of VHNSC should be better used by converting to Village Development Committee that should work as an arm of Gram Panchayat for the integrated development of the village.

Integrated Approach the Need of the Hour

The need of the hour is to bring about a holistic change in the lives of beneficiaries among the villagers by uplifting their socioeconomic and health status through effective

linkages through community, governmental and other developmental agencies. The VHNSC aka Village Development Committee should prepare an Integrated Village Development Plan with technical guidance of local organizations/agencies.

Community-based organization will be the key to bring about the overall development of the villages. Most importantly, communities need to control the process. The ultimate goal is for communities to have the confidence and competence to make informed choices from a range of appropriate options for sustainable and equitable development.

Proposed impact measures

Physical infrastructure

- All residents should have adequate housing, and there should be no homeless family.
- Ensure that the village has good connectivity with the nearest major road by an all-weather road.
- Access to safe drinking water of all households on a sustainable basis.
- Electrification of all houses.
- The village should have clean internal roads, and adequate street lighting.
- Village should have adequate communication facilities, such as post-office, telephones, and internet access in form of e-chaupal.
- Have a fair price shop and community pharmacy.
- Have a panchayat ghar or panchayat office with provision of a community hall for village meetings.
- Have paved streets with pukka covered drains.

Sanitation and environment

- The village should have a high degree of sanitation – no open-field defecation; all houses should have and use sanitary toilets. The drains should not be choked up and an efficient waste disposal system is there. The village should fulfil “Nirmal Gram Puraskar” norms.
- The Village should care for its environment by planting trees, water harvesting, and maintenance of water bodies, use of LPG or smokeless chulhas, focus on garbage disposal.
- Adopting energy saving methods like solar gas or biogas.

Health and overall human resource development

- Should have an Anganwadi center and schools of appropriate levels.
- The village should have a building for its Anganwadi, school, health center, panchayat, and community hall.
- The village should have adequate facility for sports and other physical activities. Ensure that all children in the age-group of 0-6 years should be enrolled in, and regularly attend the Anganwadi. Likewise,

all children in the 6-14 years age-group should be enrolled in and regularly attend school.

- All adults should be at least functionally literate, and should have access to facilities for continuing education.
- Access for all to primary healthcare and Reproductive Child Health (RCH) facilities (proper ante-natal and post-natal care for mothers, 100% institutional deliveries, full immunization of children, and observance of the small family norm).
- The village should take special care of its women, children, senior citizens, and persons with disabilities by strengthen ties within the community.
- Create awareness on various governmental schemes through intensive awareness campaigns.
- There should be no public consumption of liquor or any other intoxicating substances, and their use in general should be discouraged.
- Ensure and strengthen the village to have an active Gram Sabha/Gram Panchayat, women's Self-help Group/Mahila Mandal and youth club.

Catalyzing the Change

As a part of their social responsibility, medical colleges need to play the role of catalyst to bring all the stakeholders Villages level committees, Panchayat Raj Institution (PRI) members, Health functionaries – Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA), Anganwadi worker (AWW), ANM, multi-purpose worker (MPW), School students and teachers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), etc. on one platform and make an integrated plan for development of villages in their community development block area. Capacity building of the community and household will be pivotal if sustainable development is to be ensured and the Gandhian dream of Gram Swaraj is to be realized.

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